

Meet the Press

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Representative Wright/Senator Laxalt

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MARVIN KALB: CIA Director William Casey. What's next?

That's one of the questions today for our guests, House Majority Leader Jim Wright of Texas. Tomorrow he is named Speaker, the top Democrat in the House. And Republican Senator, Paul Laxalt of Nevada, one of the President's closest political friends and advisors. Both on Meet the Press, Sunday, December 7, 1986.

Hello, and welcome once again. I'm Marvin Kalb.

The Iran scandal is now more than a month old. The President is trying to cope with its corrosive implications. Yesterday, for the first time, he admitted that mistakes were made, but in the implementation of the policy. He insisted that the policy itself was correct.

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Almost every day there are new revelations and new questions, and joining me today for our questioning are Bob Kur, the NBC News Correspondent who covers the House of Representatives, and David Broder, political columnist for The Washington Post.

Mr. Wright, let's get started. According the latest polls, seven out of ten Americans think the Administration is covering up. Half of the American people, according to these polls, feel that the President is not telling the whole truth.

Yesterday, the Speaker, the man you will succeed in January, said, and I quote him, "I honestly believe the President knew," they are talking about the diversion of Iran funds to the Contras. "I think this was probably one judgment the President made on his own, and the judgment was wrong."

Do you agree with what the Speaker is saying?

REP. JAMES WRIGHT (Democratic Majority Leader): Well, I'm inclined to give the benefit of the doubt in any case to the President of the United States when he says that he did not know.

On the other hand, if this entire elaborate scheme was conceived and carried out by people in the White House, and administered by a Lieutenant Colonel, and the President did not know about it, then I think it raises the questions: Why didn't he know? Who did know? And, why was the President not advised?

KALB: Mr. Broder?

DAVID BRODER: There is a report this morning, Mr. Wright, from The Miami Herald, that we've learned, our government learned, through intercepts in 1983 that the Iranian government was involved financially and in the planning and execution of the attack on the Marine barracks in Beirut, Lebanon.

Did this information also come to the House Intelligence Committee at that time?

WRIGHT: I'm not aware that we received that information, Mr. Broder.

BRODER: Do you have any reason to believe that the Iranians were involved in that attack directly?

WRIGHT: I have no information that would confirm or deny that.

BOB KUR: Mr. Wright, what would you say, though, if that turns out to be the case, and the President still is defending his policy of opening up a dialogue with the government of Iran?

WRIGHT: As I understand it, the President contends that the policy was right but the implementation of the policy was wrong.

The policy of sending arms to the terrorist government of Iran was not right. That policy was wrong. Not only wrong, it was violation of the laws of the United States.

Now, so far as the objective of trying to find if there is a possible detente, or way in which we could work in the future with more moderate elements in Iran, that's all right.

I think that's good, and I would applaud any probe or any effort to do that. Had it not been for Mr. Kissinger and others probing patiently to see if there were an opportunity for detente with China it would never have occurred, and I think everybody agrees that's for the best interest of everyone.

But, if that were the case, it seems to me, Mr. Kur, that we should have sent medicines, should have sent benign things that bespeak friendship, not weapons.

KUR: Mr. Wright, a couple of weeks ago you were among the first on Capitol Hill to sit in the Gallery with a copy of a law book and cite the law, try to define it,

as it applies in this case. That was a couple of weeks back.

From what you have learned, and from what you know now at this point, would you expect the various investigations to lead to criminal prosecutions in this matter, or would you be surprised if they did?

WRIGHT: My interest is not so much in criminal prosecution. I think that's the business of the courts.

The business of Congress is to determine exactly what happened, when it happened, by whom, who did what, and at whose direction, and to see that changes are made if laws need to be corrected and improved to determine that this kind of thing shall not happen again. I think that's the business of Congress.

BRODER: You said a moment ago that this was in violation of the laws. What laws were broken?

WRIGHT: At least four laws that I could cite. The National Security Act was violated, in that it requires prior notice to Congress, and if time does not permit that, it requires prior notice to the congressional leaders, and then timely notice to the committees of Congress.

Timely notice doesn't mean a year. It means hours, or days, at the latest.

The Arms Export Control Act was violated, in that it requires notice to Congress of shipments to certain countries, Iran, specifically included.

The Anti-Terrorism law was violated, in that it requires any shipment to any terrorist country of more than \$1 million to be reported immediately to Congress.

The Boland Amendment seems to have been violated, surely in principle, if not in letter.

KUR: Well, Mr. Wright, that's an impressive list, yet, Congress has tried with those laws, and has past laws to try to stop what the Administration appears to have done.

You now talk about tightening laws again, or making new restrictions. What's to stop an administration from doing anything it wants to do?

WRIGHT: Mr. Kur, ultimately, there are remedies, of course. We all know that. In the final analysis, Congress has powers that it can bring into play. We don't want to contemplate that kind of a situation.

KUR: Such as?

WRIGHT: Such as occurred in Watergate. We don't want to talk about that.

The courts will apply the rules as they affect criminal prosecutions, and I would like to think that the President, understanding of the law and that it has been violated, will make us the commitment that he will cooperate with laws of the United States in the future.

KALB: Mr. Wright, that raises a number of other questions. We'll get to those when Meet the Press returns right after these messages.

(Commercial)

KALB: We are back on Meet the Press, discussing, among other things, the Iran Contra scandal with the House Majority Leader Jim Wright, who tomorrow will be named the Speaker of the House, the top Democrat.

Mr. Wright, picking up exactly where you left off, what can the Congress do, specifically? Might it, for example, under your leadership in the House, decide that the \$100 million already earmarked for the Contras should be stopped. Is that possible?

WRIGHT: Well, of course, that's possible. I don't want to anticipate what Congress will do. The purpose

of the investigation is to get the facts and make a consolidated record and be clear on what has been done, and then do whatever is necessary or desirable.

KALB: Okay. But do you envisage that, for example, any additional funds are going to be made available in the 100th Congress?

WRIGHT: I think it would be a very difficult thing.

KALB: Very difficult.

WRIGHT: Yes, I really do.

BRODER: Any action by Congress, including the investigations, is likely to be lengthy. What can the President do beyond the steps he's already taken to resolve the questions that the American people have, that Congress has, and to put this government back in the business of governing?

WRIGHT: Well, the government is in the business of governing, and one of our determinations, as the leaders of Congress, is to make certain that this investigation does not paralyze us, or distract us, from the serious business of governing.

We have an agenda that we will pursue. On January 6th we will begin passing legislation. We are not going to be distracted or preoccupied by this matter.

But, we do have the responsibility, of course, I think, to see to it that the laws are faithfully executed.

KALB: Mr. Wright, I've got to ask you this question. It is probably simplistic. Why doesn't the President, to get this over with, he wants to, everybody does, why doesn't the President call in Colonel North, Admiral Poindexter, shut the door, sit down, it's just the three of us. Tell me what happened, and let's get to the bottom of it right now. Why can't he do something like this?

WRIGHT: That sounds like an excellent idea. I think if the President sincerely wants to help, he would insist that his aides who carried out this elaborate plan be forthcoming with Congress and not hide behind the Fifth Amendment and refuse to tell Congress what happened.

KALB: But even before they get to the Congress, why doesn't he just call them in himself?

WRIGHT: Well, that's fine with me. I think he should.

KUR: Mr. Wright, there is --

WRIGHT: Mr. Truman had a statement, you know, "The buck stops here."

KUR: There are separate investigations in the House and Senate forthcoming. What really can two congressional investigations accomplish in going over the same territory, basically, questioning many of the same witnesses, that one select committee can't? Why can't there be just one committee with House and Senate members on it instead of two?

WRIGHT: That's our constitutional system. That's the way it has worked for 60 years, and that's the way it worked in the Watergate instance, that's the way it worked with regard to the scandals that were on earth in the 1950s. That's the way it has always worked, and the system has not been too bad. It works pretty well.

KUR: Is there really a reason to do that, though, other than to satisfy egos, if you will, of people who want to participate in these investigations?

WRIGHT: No. We are not creating a big committee. We are creating a small select committee. Whoever is appointed to this committee will be people whose integrity, and objectivity and professionalism can be relied upon. That's the main thing.

KUR: You had said recently some things which, if you take them in their full implication, are pretty

frightening about the President of the United States, and I want to know really whether you intended to be as alarming as you sounded.

You said at one point that President Reagan has the capacity to just utterly reject factual information that doesn't fit in with his preconceived notions.

I wonder, in your dealing with him, whether you can cite an example of that, and tell me whether you really think that it is as frightening as it seemed to sound.

WRIGHT: Well, a little over a year ago, as one of many examples, I was sitting in the White House, and Senator Hatfield, the Chairman of the Senate Committee on Appropriations, told the President that during his tenure, the President's tenure, we have increased military spending by 86 percent, and have reduced discretionary domestic spending by about 34 percent.

The President refused to believe it. He just refused to acknowledge or accept the fact. This is a characteristic of a positive thinker. The President is truly a positive thinker, and that's a nice -- that's the positive part of him.

He has many splendid characteristics. I wish only that he had a little bit of Harry Truman in him. Harry Truman said, "The buck stops here." Mr. Reagan says, well, let's put it on a credit card and charge it to the grandchildren. Harry Truman conducted the whole Korean War, the third most costly war in our history, without adding a penny to the national debt.

BRODER: Well, Mr. Wright, are you suggesting that in these instances that are now matters of controversy, the President may have been told of them, but the fact did not register in his mind?

WRIGHT: That's beyond my knowledge. I couldn't answer that, Mr. Broder.

I would like very much to help to contribute to a bipartisan foreign policy, and a bipartisan arrange-

ement. I'd like to see a restitution of the kind of of a climate that existed when I came to Congress. Mr. Rayburn was Speaker, Mr. Eisenhower was President. They were two men who trusted one another, who disagreed on domestic policy but were working together on foreign policy.

Three times in this last month, I have sat personally with the President and earnestly implored him to heed the advice of Congress and not violate the Salt II Treaty. Now, the President didn't see fit to follow that advice, but this past week, I have talked with Secretary Baker of Treasury and asked him if the Administration would join us now in doing something about this \$170 billion trade deficit.

And, I got some encouragement, that maybe now they are ready to join us in legislation. So, that's progress.

BRODER: Speaking of deficit, as Majority Leader, you were frank to say, even in opposition to the Speaker, that revenue increases were going to have to be part of any significant attack on the budget deficit. Is that still your view?

WRIGHT: I think we need to tell the truth to ourselves, as well as to the public. The truth is that you just simply cannot double military spending in six years and reduce revenues by \$135 billion a year, as the President's 1981 tax cut, and balance the budget.

BRODER: Will that be the policy of the House Democrats now, to seek a tax increase as part of the budget deficit reduction package?

WRIGHT: No.

I think the policy of the Democrats will be to face the truth, and to seek some way of reaching the budget deficit targets. Now, you can't do it without one of several things: Either a stretch out of those targets dates, or a stretch out of our military spending goals, or some stretch out of the cuts for the top brackets that were voted last year, bringing them from 70

percent to 50 percent, 38 percent, and 28 percent, maybe to close it off there and say, until we get our fiscal house in better order, no more tax cuts for the wealthiest people. Any one of several ways might help us get there.

KUR: Mr. Wright, you mentioned arms control. Back in October, before the Iceland summit, the House dropped several pretty strong arms control provisions it was going to attach to some legislation. Are you now ready to try to reattach those and reassert those on another matter in the House? Will you try to force the President's hand at all on arms control now?

WRIGHT: Well, I think Congress will. We did this as a demonstration of our bipartisanship so that the President could go to Reykjavik and have a chance to negotiate with free unfettered hands. We explained that to him, and he said he thanked us at the time, he appreciated it.

Meanwhile, I have suggested to him that the Congress earnestly hopes that he will heed the clear intent of Congress and not make it necessary for us to have that kind of a confrontation.

KALB: Mr. Wright, thank you very much for being our guest today.

WRIGHT: Thank you very much, Mr. Kalb.

KALB: In a moment, one of the President's closest and oldest political friends and advisors, Senator Paul Laxalt of Nevada, when Meet the Press returns right after these messages.

(Commercial)

KALB: We are back on Meet the Press with Senator Paul Laxalt of Nevada, one of the President's closest political friends.

Senator, you've been talking with the President, I

understand, about this whole problem of Iran, the Contra scandal, et cetera.

One of the largest questions in Washington is why is he resisting the very urgent advice of many Republican colleagues of his to fire or encourage the dismissal of Donald Regan?

SEN. PAUL LAXALT: Well, first of all, Marvin, I think there is split among the congressional leadership as to whether Mr. Regan should stay or take a walk.

I think fundamentally, I think that the President feels strongly that Mr. Regan is doing the kind of job that Ronald Reagan wants.

As far I'm personally concerned, I must confess to you that shortly after the Contra phase of the story broke, it was my immediate inclination that Don should leave, because he runs a tight ship and I subscribe to the premise that the NSC was within his jurisdiction.

I found, doing some digging later, that that wasn't true, that the NSC reported directly to the President, and did not report to Don. So, I think it's the President's call. He's perfectly comfortable with the situation, and eventually he'll do the right thing.

I think probably that Don himself has to do some inquiring because of, one, in this kind of situation, he has to think in terms of the presidency first, and he's done that. He's been loyal. He's been the lightning rod.

But eventually in this business to get to the point, you have to take the overall national interest, the interest of the presidency, and submerge your own interests accordingly. He'll have to arrive at a point somewhere along the way as to whether or not, because of all the controversy, he's less than effective in representing this President in the hectic weeks and months ahead. I don't think he is near that yet.

KALB: Let me just quote from your colleague Orin Hatch, talking about Reagan's service to the President. "He did not protect the President. He did not inform the President, or what is worse, he did not assure that he was informed himself." Now, that's for Orrin Hatch.

In what way, therefore, has Mr. Reagan really served the best interests of the President?

LAXALT: Well, I think, obviously, Senator Hatch is subscribing to the premise that Don Regan was privy to the information related to the Contra cause. As I indicated originally, that wasn't the case. If you adopted that as a premise, Orin Hatch would be correct, but I think he's adopted a wrong premise.

BRODER: Senator, as you have pointed out to us, you have been quite involved as a member of the Senate in a number of delicate foreign policy and national security discussions and operations at the White House.

Have you been in any meetings with the President on those subjects where Don Regan was not present?

LAXALT: Well, the only ones where I was intimately involved, and I suppose you are alluding to that, David, would be the Philippine Marcos venture, and in every one of those meetings, yes, Don was present.

BRODER: Is it conceivable to you personally that a national security operation of this scale could have been conducted in the White House without the knowledge of the Chief of Staff?

LAXALT: I find it hard to believe, but I believe Don Regan when he said he had absolutely no knowledge of it. I think we had a unique situation here, for whatever reason the NSC was doing its own thing thinking they were serving the overall policy and desires of the President to somehow get funding to the Contras. And, I think it's one of those unique situations where neither Don Regan nor the President know.

Now, people find that hard to believe, and that's distressing to this President because above all his greatest commodity has been his basic honesty. I've been in this business a long time, and never run into anybody who is as essentially honest as Ronald Reagan. There isn't an ounce of guile in his soul, and in this situation, when he tells me flat out, which he could have finessed, David, he could say maybe I was told, it's a busy place, and attempt to finesse in that fashion. He didn't do that. He flat out and denied, and so did Don Regan, and I tend to believe both of them.

KUR: Senator, is there something in the President's character, which obviously you are very familiar with, or in the way that he works that enabled a situation like this to grow and to happen, number one, and number two, is there something similar in his character or in the way he works that has not enabled him to put it behind him very quickly?

LAXALT: I don't know whether it's a character problem or not, Bob. I think he wants to get it out of the way, and get it out of the way very quickly, and I think he should.

My own view is, and I've indicated this to him, that we should martial up all the forces in the federal government, FBI and everything else, and get ahead of the information curve. You shouldn't sit idly by in these weeks and months ahead on a Chinese water treatment basis and have these explosions. We ought to get it out, and let it all hang out, and be in front of all this.

KALB: Senator, let me ask you the same question I asked Mr. Wright. Why doesn't the President, in that case, if that is the case, simply call in North and Poindexter, shut the door and ask them what happened?

LAXALT: Marvin, I'd love dearly to see that. You've got an additional factor here since the disclosure is made. You've got lawyers. And, I don't know what

extent that that would present a problem legally to these men.

I personally think it would be substantially fantastic to have the President call both of them in, now, tell me gentlemen, what in the world happened.

KALB: Don't you think you'd get to the end of it that much faster, and avoid a lot of trouble?

LAXALT: I think it would facilitate it greatly, and that's the point that I attempted to make a little while ago. I think this Administration has to get in front of the information curve. We shouldn't have to wait around until The New York Times, or The Washington Post, or one of the networks makes these revelations. We should be doing that.

KUR: Well, some say this did happen, because the President doesn't pay attention to details, that that's how this thing was able to mushroom around him if he didn't know.

LAXALT: But, Bob, remember this, the Contra side of this was divulged by the President of the United States on his own, within hours when the information was brought to him by Ed Meese. He said we've got to immediately inform the congressional leaders, which they did. We have to immediately inform the American people, which they did by calling a press conference.

I think he's been very forthcoming.

KUR: But on the detailed side of it, you talk about rogue operations, there is a lot of writing and talking about this rogue operations by the NSC or people in the NSC.

How do these things happen under an administration that's supposed to be in control?

LAXALT: I think probably part of it is that the NSC has been a rogue operation to one degree or another under several administrations.

Under this Administration, you have a President who freely delegates, and that has served him very well generally. This may be one of those areas and one of those times where it, perhaps, hasn't served him all that well.

BRODER: Senator Hatch, in that same interview from which Marvin quoted, said that while he personally felt that Bill Casey has done an admirable job in running the CIA, he believes that he has lost the confidence of Congress. What's your judgment about that?

LAXALT: I disagree respectfully with my esteemed colleague Orin Hatch. I think Bill Casey has done a fantastic job with the Intelligence Agency. You can go anywhere in the world, and you'll find that Bill Casey has given them what they needed in an effort to reinforce that whole effort.

I see nothing in this effort so far to indicate his leaving. He has the complete loyalty and trust of the President of the United States. I personally think Bill should stay.

KALB: Senator, I'm terribly sorry, but our time is up.

Thank you very much for being our guest today on Meet the Press, and thank you all for being with us today, and we'll see you again next Sunday.